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ABSTRACT

Currently, an increasing number of states support school readiness programs, recognizing that high quality early childhood education positively affects all children's success in school and the quality of their future. Recent federal initiatives, including Good Start Grow Smart, the revised guidance for the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) state plans, and the reauthorization of Head Start, call upon states to enhance these efforts, by developing or rigorously reviewing their prekindergarten guidelines or standards in literacy, language, and mathematics to be in alignment with state K-12 standards. This report/policy brief examines the quality of state prekindergarten standards in language, literacy, and mathematics. Recognizing that states are at various stages of development, the analysis in the report was designed to highlight quality standards, and to provide feedback to states in the process of establishing, reviewing, or strengthening prekindergarten standards. In this policy brief, methods and analytic tools for examining quality are described. (NKA)

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The State of State Prekindergarten Standards in 2003

CENTER FOR THE IMPROVEMENT OF EARLY READING ACHIEVEMENT (CIERA)

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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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The State of State Prekindergarten Standards in 2003

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Today, an increasing number of states support school readiness programs, recognizing that high quality early childhood education positively affects all children's success in school and the quality of their future. Research confirms that these benefits are especially pronounced for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, many of whom have had limited educational experiences. These studies provide further evidence that education cannot be postponed until children reach school-age; rather, nurturing early educational environments employing research-based practices provide a critical foundation for children's later achievement.

Recent federal initiatives, including Good Start Grow Smart, the revised guidance for the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) state plans, and the reauthorization of Head Start, call upon states to enhance these efforts, by developing or rigorously reviewing their prekindergarten guidelines or standards in literacy, language, and mathematics to be in alignment with state K-12 standards. Quality prekindergarten standards are a critical part of a state's architecture in developing systems of service delivery for young children, serving to frame content and curriculum, professional development, and assessments for the benefit of helping children develop school readiness skills.

This report examines the quality of state prekindergarten standards in language, literacy, and mathematics. Recognizing that states are at various stages of development, the analysis was designed to highlight quality standards, and to provide feedback to states in the process of establishing, reviewing, or strengthening prekindergarten standards. In this policy brief, we describe our methods, and analytic tools for examining quality. We encourage State Department early childhood specialists to request individual rating scores for their state by contacting: sbn2@georgetown.edu.

Background

As part of the Good Start Grow Smart initiative, Early Childhood Academies were designed to promote best practices and to encourage greater coordination and collaboration across early childhood programs and funding streams. In preparation for the Academies, content specialists, working with the Assistant Secretary of Elementary and Secondary Education, were charged with developing criteria for what constituted quality standards in language, literacy and mathematics. Following an extensive literature search, and series of discussions, the following criteria were established:

Skill-Focus. Standards and indicators must focus on skills that young children should know and be able to do. These skills should be grounded in the core discipline, and represent foundational understandings of important, key ideas. In contrast, indicators in the learning domain that focus on values, activities, or processes in lieu of skills or indicators that attempt to prescribe how material should be taught are not well-grounded in the discipline, nor are they proven to be related to later achievement. Examples highlight these differences:

- Preschool children should demonstrate understanding of basic conversational vocabulary (skill-indicator).
- Preschool children should count the items in a collection of one to five items and know the last counting word tells "how many" (skill-indicator).
- Preschoolers should delight at the simple joy of creating drawings and writings (value).
- Preschoolers participate in games and lessons involving separation or repetition of words and word sounds (activity).

Research-Based. Standards and indicators must be research-based. Indicators that are built on a solid foundation of research in child development, early childhood, language, early literacy, and mathematics ensure that skills are reasonably achievable for all prekindergarten children, age-appropriate, and necessary for school readiness.

- Comprehends and responds to stories read aloud (Research-based; see research by Dickinson, Morrow; Whitehurst)
- Reads simple one-syllable and high frequency words (Not research based; no evidence that this is a realistic benchmark for pre-k children)
- Uses tables, charts, and graphs in a systematic manner to represent meaningful information and relationships (Not research-based; no evidence that this is a realistic benchmark for pre-k children or that pre-k is the best time to emphasize these topics).

Clearly Written. Standards and indicators must be written clearly enough for teachers, parents, policymakers, and the general public to understand. Educational jargon can be off-putting, alienating the very public from which educators seek support. In contrast, a clear indicator focuses on a particular targeted skill (instead of many skills), is measurable, and sends an unambiguous message as to what preschoolers will know and be able to do.

- Recognizes common sounds at the beginning of words (clear)
- Demonstrates phonemic awareness of oral blending (not clear)
- Models equal and unequal parts of units using concrete manipulatives (not clear)

Comprehensive. Standards and indicators must be comprehensive, representing the knowledge and skills essential for achievement. Indicators need to cover the domain and not overemphasize one set of skills over another.

- State standards include indicators in oral language comprehension, phonological awareness, vocabulary, letter name knowledge and print concepts (comprehensive in literacy).
- State standards include indicators in number & number sense, measurement, geometry, statistics, algebra, and mathematical reasoning (comprehensive in mathematics)
- State standards include oral language comprehension, phonological awareness, letter name knowledge, and print concepts (vocabulary is missing; not comprehensive)

Manageable. Standards must be manageable given the constraints of time. Given competing demands and limited hours (many programs are still only 2 hours), states should be parsimonious in the number of indicators required. Too many indicators put undo demands on teachers, and place impossible expectations on children.

- State standards include in the range of 10-40 indicators in each content domain, allowing comprehensive coverage of the domains (balance)
- State standards include less than 10 or more than 40 indicators in each content domain which results either in too few for comprehensive coverage of learning categories or too many in relation to the whole early childhood curriculum (lack of balance)

Applicable to Diverse Settings. Standards and indicators must be appropriate for learning in different early childhood settings. This may appear obvious to early childhood educators, but it is important to stress. Learning in the early years occurs in many different educational settings–some

children are in family day care arrangements, others, in center based care, still others with family members. To be truly effective, standards and indicators must be consistent across settings, helping to eliminate the fragmentation that has traditionally plagued the early childhood field.

Method for Examining Standards

Standards and indicators in language, literacy, and mathematics for each state were coded by at least two experts in each of the requisite fields. Reliability was established, followed by selective re-codings to further ensure quality. Exemplars of strong and weak indicators were selected to help states better understand criteria.

Rating scores were determined as follows:

Percent of skill indicators over total number of indicators;

Percent of research-based skill indicators over total number of skill indicators;

Percent of clear indicators over total number of skill indicators;

Percent of skill indicators in each research-based category within the domain;

Percent of setting-independent indicators over the total number of skill indicators.

Percentages were converted to grade designations: 90-100% A, 80-89% B, 70-79% C, 60-69% D, and below 60% F. To provide clear guidance to states, grades were given in each category, along with an overall grade.

Next Steps

CIERA intends to provide helpful feedback to state directors of early childhood on state pre-k standards, prior to publishing these data. Individual state reports will be generated, and distributed to state contacts, followed by discussions with the authors of the report.

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